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Book Review: *Archaeological Landscapes on the High Plains* Edited by Laura L. Scheiber and Bonnie J. Clark

Marcel Kornfeld  
*University of Wyoming*

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BOOK REVIEWS


In 1962 Lewis Binford (*American Antiquity*, 28 [2]:217-25) classified archaeological objects into technomic, sociotechnic, and ideotechnic categories. In the following decades the New Archaeologists, largely concerned with societies at the Domestic Mode of Production, emphasized the technomic objects. Prehistorians of state societies were much more frequently faced with socio- and ideotechnic objects, ritual and state symbols; the significance of these to all societies eventually crawled back into the thinking of prehistorians of band and tribal systems.

Thence come landscapes into the archaeological discourse. As with manufactured objects, landscapes can be categorized into technomic, sociotechnic, and ideotechnic classes. And the authors of this volume engage landscapes from all three perspectives. The editors address the diverse perspectives of the chapters by pointing
out the multitude of definitions of the word landscape and the commonality in these definitions revolving around the “emphasis on the negotiation between people and their physical surrounding” (5). “Negotiation” is an ambiguous word, and if all of the authors buy into this perspective I think they do so in very different ways. However, the editors’ point that the natural world is at once natural and cultural is important. In Binford’s words, “If there is one principle that anthropological field studies have affirmed over and over again, it is that the intellectual contexts of behavior in different cultures renders rationality a relative phenomenon” (Working at Archaeology 1983:220). The editors, though, overstep their bounds a bit when they state “Hunter-gatherers primarily conceptualize rather than construct their landscapes, that is, they imbue features on the land with meaning rather than physically alter the land itself” (8). If by this they mean that foragers do not cause global warming they are undoubtedly correct. However, to ask whether hunter-gatherers ever affected their environment to a degree that endangered them, the answer should probably be yes.

The strength of the chapters in this volume is multi-fold; the weaknesses show some troubling trends. The two most prominent strengths are the many synthetic chapters and the models, scenarios, and hypotheses in them. In today’s world of segmented salvage archaeology, Mitchell’s, Gilmore’s, Johnson’s, and Peterson’s syntheses of specific features (burned rock middens [Mitchell], burials [Gilmore]) or of specific regions—east Cheyenne Tableland [Peterson], Llano Estacado [Johnson]) breathe new life into prehistory. The remaining chapters focus on places and their link to the landscape. Scheiber sets the Donovan site in the changing cultural landscape of a Platte River tributary, while Clark and Church apply the landscape approach to issues of class and ethnicity. These chapters consider the temporal dimension and the changing view of landscapes through time by either single (Church) or different ethnic groups (Clark, Scheiber). The “odd-persons-out” are Berger and colleagues; however, they add a necessary dimension by pointing out the effects of taphonomy on landscape archaeology, thereby rendering all the other chapters in this volume somewhat suspect in failing to consider taphonomy. On the other hand, Berger and colleagues’ cow pie archaeology offers no conclusions of its own. Integrating taphonomy into landscape studies remains an important and difficult tasks for Plains and other archaeologists.

Perhaps the volume’s greatest strength lies in the ideas and hypotheses strewn throughout its chapters. In the final chapter Duke quotes Binford (Debating Archaeology 1989:17) regarding his “disparaging remarks about ‘accommodative arguments’” (280) that characterize Mitchell’s chapter. All the chapters rely to some extent on accommodative arguments, distracting from their explanatory potential—Binford’s ultimate goal—but this may be the volume’s greatest asset. The accommodative arguments are replete with assumptions, models, scenarios, and hypotheses that will keep generations of Plains archaeologists busy evaluating them. Hence this book is not an end, but a beginning. Landscape and High Plains landscapes are complex phenomena: our answers cannot come from one volume, but this volume will set the tone for some time to come.

Finally, the salvage archaeology syndrome manifested in many chapters is double-edged. The mere publication of the chapters by Clark, Church, Mitchell, and Gilmore deserves applause. The foresight of the principal investigators is refreshing in today’s discipline. Still, to take one example, Gilmore’s two “study areas” are really not intellectually linked; his paper works not because, but despite the sample choice being driven for reasons other than research problems. In a similar vein, because most of the chapters are the result of larger works, the original data are sometimes underreferenced. These, however, are minor faults in a sea of excellent papers.

All anthropologists and Plains scholars should have this book, especially geographers and historians, as well as biological and paleoenvironmental scientists. The volume is a good and easy read providing a fresh perspective on the Plains. Marcel Kornfeld, Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming.